



Chapter Three

The two small solars were already gone by the time Edward arrived at his station on the marsh, but that was no matter, a canoe would be better. On the edge of combustion with fear, anger, longing, and anxiety chasing themselves like otters, he needed to be doing something strenuous. He could hardly breathe as he lowered the canoe from the rack, and it wasn't until he was paddling along Hog Creek that his heart slowed and he regained a sense of where he was, not in some neverland of violence and fear, but safe on the marsh, buoyed up by water, under the vast fenland sky. He passed a clump of reeds, their laden seed heads gleaming white and silver in the sun. He saw the little hand and foot prints of a raccoon in the black mud along the creek, heard the abrupt splash of a frog, and the softer, almost seamless, entrance of a snake in the water. Any year now he expected the first alligator, though his colleagues felt the climate was still too cold. Edward thought the reptiles inevitable and kept his eyes open.

Today, though, a pleasantly cool breeze combed the reeds. The green-gold grasses rippled like the fur of some giant animal, and passing clouds darkened patches of the bright landscape. In his agitation, Edward had neglected to bring his collecting gear, record slate, and storage jars. When he passed the first water level gauge, he had to write the number on the back of a dance ticket. He knew that he should go back to sign in properly and begin the day right, but he feared, actually feared, leaving the water. Kara was right: he was a true Aqua; he belonged here.

And Kara? Ah, that was the question, the excruciating question. He shipped the paddle so that he could crank and open his Komunikator; he scrolled right to CrimeBits. It was inconceivable that anyone had harmed Kara, though such things happened, but not to us, Edward told himself. Not to us. The neighbors had heard nothing, seen nothing. And wouldn't they? The streets were crowded. If Edythe was to be believed, Kara had not gone out until mid afternoon, the very safest time, and he had retraced her usual routes not more than a couple hours later. The only real danger was if she'd been accosted on the stairs or discovered an intruder in her apartment. How well did he know that Norton on the second floor, who kept such odd hours? What was his work, anyway? Something with the water system or the sanitation. Dirty water, compost, trash removal, defecation and decay all had a sinister connotation for Edward. Even Rayli, homely and near-sighted would see a beauty like Kara well enough to _ but here Edward caught his breath. Rayli was happily married to the perfectly nice Eva; he was a decent man and someone known. The intimacy of the small closed city suddenly weighed on Edward. He felt that there would be such comfort in strangers, in knowing there were strangers, in blaming someone strange.

Control, control! His imagination was beginning to throw up images of the Fishers of the neighborhood, of dancers at the Circles, of the local Carters, and Edward knew that it would reach Jonas and Harris in a moment if he couldn't rein it in. After a last scroll through the CrimeBits updates, he snapped his Komunikator shut and resumed paddling. If he knew nothing else, he knew the marsh. If Kara was somewhere in the reeds he'd find her, he and no one else. And if she was not there, as he hoped, profoundly, desperately hoped, he must prepare for Absence, for an alien and deeper marsh.

Just before lunch, when, mosquito bitten and steaming with heat, he was approaching the very western edge of the marshland, Edward got a call on his Komunikator. Jimb, the section master, was wondering where he was, why he hadn't signed in, and why, if he was on the water, he hadn't taken his kit. Edward explained as best he could, and Jimb was sympathetic_ Kara had taught his niece _ but when Edward closed off, he felt his chest tighten. Disappearances hacked a hole in the world. No man is an island _ how did that go? If a promontory falls into the sea, Europe is the less _ something like that. Ancient, ancient, yet true, and truer now, when so many promontories had, if not collapsed, drowned and their inhabitants with them. So when Kara, who had been part of so many worlds, his own included, vanished, she left behind a void that was filled by suspicion. Blameless though he was, Edward could feel it settle about him; he was the last seen by, after all, and he knew that awareness was behind his own sudden mistrust of their neighbors, their friends. If he was suspect, who could be considered innocent?

But was he really blameless, asked a little gnawing voice, quick as a rat? While he'd sat over coffee in the Bulwark, while he'd stared at the marshes and delayed seeing her, yes, delayed, fearful of her illness, of her depression, of Melankol, Kara had vanished. He had let her go without his farewell, even without his notice, so he was not innocent after all. For the resulting darkness there was no cure but to paddle on back up the Hog and examine each little tidal rivulet he passed. Would Harris be on the marsh yet? Would the SafetyMen already be

searching? Edward thought not; there were procedures, questions, a look at what Harris always called the locus. But if he was not on the water already, it was late, too late. The tide was on the turn; Edward could feel it. In a couple of hours the little streams would be no more than muddy, impassable furrows, the haunt of sandpipers, willets, and gulls; the bulk of the marsh would be impassable until the next tide. Now was the time to thread the waterways, to circle the city, to search.

The white glitter of the sun was well below the tallest reeds when Edward returned, exhausted, to the station. Although he did not know it, Kara was now on CrimeBits, tentatively as a Disappearance. Jimb greeted him kindly and said nothing when Edward started transferring gauge readings from dance stubs to his record slate.

“We’re so sorry,” he said, and Edward knew then that it was official.

His legs were stiff from kneeling in the canoe, but it was shock that made them weak. He sat down on one of the benches and rested his hands on his knees. He had covered a huge expanse of the marsh, but no one could expect completeness in that shifting landscape. Edward had trusted to some hidden sympathy, to some mysterious, more subtle tide to lead him to Kara. And it would have. It would have. He raised his head defiantly and said, “I’m sure she’s not in the marsh.”

Jimb shrugged. If Kara was really gone, the marsh was much the most likely, but there were always exceptions, and loving precision, he conceded that.

When the station master did not produce any counter argument, Edward began to walk restlessly around the room. There were rumors of abductions _ not real Absences. Some said there were unauthorized outposts on the new islands; others claimed there were Manhattan tower apartments that were still viable, high, high up over the water and run on ancient generators. You could hear them on still nights, the watermen said, though others claimed it was the wind blowing through empty windows, and eccentrics held that both wind and noise were ghosts. The latter was all Super, but still, was it more fanciful than Absence? Too soon to think of that, Edward told himself. There’s an explanation, a reason; she is safe _ somewhere. He had to believe that.

He stopped by the SafetyPoint on his way home. Harris was gone and the duty man with shaved head and doleful expression could not, or would not, give out any information. Edward went heavily back down the stone steps. The sky was still light, but the great walls shadowed the dike road, and between shadow and glare, he pushed his way through the crowds almost unseeing. At the juncture of the Raised Road, he was halted by a cluster of people with their bundles and carts. Where were the damn SafetyMen? He edged his way through the throng until he was close enough to hear a voice over the usual city sounds of pavement, wind, gulls, and cart wheels. The voice was deep and resonant, if a trifle hoarse, like an old string instrument marred with clicks and buzzes but still operating on some select and suggestive vibration. Edward felt the voice before he could distinguish the words; pressing closer yet, he saw it belonged to one of the WaterPriests. This one was broad shouldered and lanky with a wispy goatish beard, very dark brows, and the wild, intent expression of a drummer at an all night Circle. He was

perched on a ladder set atop a cart, and the last light of the sunset had dyed his high brow and jutting cheekbones a deep pinkish brown.

“...from water we come,” the man shouted.

“From water,” some of the crowd repeated. Edward felt a prickling uneasiness at their response. Though the WaterPriests were among the chief purveyors of Super, he had always discounted their influence. But here was a crowd blocking the dike road.

“We swim in water in our mother’s womb, and we carry water within our cells. Water is the source.”

“The source!” It seemed to Edward that more in the crowd were responding, drawn in like fish after a tide.

“Water is the source of all life. Water is our origin, and ultimately we return to water. Water is our destiny.”

“Destiny,” echoed the crowd.

“No one has a different path,” said the WaterPriest, his voice almost a whisper. “All are bound to water, bound to seek water, bound to come to water at the last.” He paused and looked around the shadowed faces. “You are in darkness,” he said portentously.

The priest’s somber tone was a rhetorical trick, familiar along with the usual vague promises and the suggestion, clearly spurious, of hidden knowledge. “You seek light, but you want water. Water has both light and darkness, warmth and cool, water takes away your faults, your griefs...”

His voice was insinuating, seductive, yet carrying, too. It projected without effort over the crowd, over the sounds of the traffic, the random voices of the city. Enticing, threatening, consoling _ even Edward felt susceptible and that aroused his fear: Could Kara have listened to this? Her windows looked out toward the Raised Road. How often had he seen her leaning out her window, the sun on her face, cheerfully contemplating the bustle, the crowds, the protective cluster of pastel buildings? Oh, in those days, she would have turned back, called, “Come listen to this,” laughed at such earnest Super. But now? Now when she was afflicted with Pastolgia, or admit it, Melankol, what would be the effect? He could feel his heart beating faster. Had she come out to listen? Had she? No, no, she would not have left the apartment. But suppose she had?

“... you need to return to water, to the source of life,” the WaterPriest cried, his voice rising in sound and intensity.

What might Kara have done? It was unthinkable, but Edward could not put the idea out of his mind. He, himself, had found so many, so many who had “returned to water,” who had joined their ancestors in the flood, who had ended grief or guilt or loneliness.

“I welcome you to your destiny. I welcome you to water.”

“To a muddy grave,” Edward shouted, half beside himself with anxiety. “Don’t listen to him!” Turning now to the faces on either side. “Don’t let him entice you to the marsh. I know the water, I work on the marsh.”

“Water forgives all,” said the priest. His voice rose but his delivery did not falter. “You must come to

water.”

“You must get the hell out of here!” There was a protesting murmur from the crowd, and Edward was jostled from both sides. “He calls you to water and I have to haul up the corpses!” he shouted furiously. “He leads you to madness and your death!”

“Water will calm you,” said the priest. “Water soothes, water takes away our sins.”

“Takes away our sins,” echoed the crowd, angered and perhaps confused by Edward’s unexpected and irregular outburst.

He tried to make himself heard over the increasing tumult, but, with the press around the WaterPriest and an increasingly impatient mass of Carters and pedestrians blocked by the gathering, his words were lost. Shoved by one of the priest’s devotees, Edward struck back, causing gasps and curses and producing a flurry of blows that sent him to the pavement with blood on his face. He might have been injured seriously, if some of the Carters, anxious to finish their routes, had not waded into the fray.

In a moment, there was general confusion. The normal restraint of the city vanished in one of the sudden eruptions of violent emotion that periodically afflicted its inhabitants and slicked the streets with blood. Within an hour, not one would be able to define what had touched off the Fraka, setting neighbor against neighbor and exploding all the carefully cultivated civility of the streets. The WaterPriest kept shouting over the throng, but violence had broken the spell of his words, and the arrival of SafetyMen with their whistles and truncheons put an end to his oration.

Holding a cloth to his bleeding nose, Edward staggered off the street and collapsed in a doorway. The roadway seemed removed from normal life and his whole perception threatened to melt at the edges. He was trying to get his breathing under control when he was confronted by a SafetyMan, slate, pen _ and truncheon _ at the ready.

“You should be ticketed.” The SafetyMan was small and dark with a fine aquiline nose and a severe expression.

Edward raised one hand indifferently. “That water snake led Kara away,” he said. “How you can let him rave when there are so many people with troubles?” He didn’t dare say more. He was exhausted; his mouth and his ribs hurt and his right knee was throbbing.

“He is a licensed WaterPriest,” said the SafetyMan. “There are those who believe.” Just the same, he did not proceed with the ticket, and Edward understood that he might gain some sympathy if he made an effort.

“Kara Wistley has disappeared,” he said. “It’s official today. We’ve been together for two years. Her apartment is over there.” He waved his hand in the general direction of Kara’s building. “In her state of mind, if she listened to all that Super about water _.” He stopped again. The SafetyMan had probably never heard the WaterPriest, had never listened to that seductive voice promising calm and happiness. Yes, he thought, for Kara, that

voice would have suggested happiness.

The SafetyMan checked his Komunikator and seemed to hesitate. “Who can speak for you?” he asked finally. “Who can confirm your relationship to Kara Wistley?”

Edward gave Baba’s name and Harris’s _ a senior SafetyMan as reference carried weight, though Edward’s name was duly entered and he was warned to stay away from the WaterPriests. “This leniency is strictly out of respect for your loss,” the SafetyMan said as he helped Edward up. “Strictly.”

Edward thanked him and started a slow and painful walk home. There was no point in returning to Kara’s apartment now. It was official; she was gone.